

under the skin by comicbrooke

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Summary: A year after mysterious events changed Hawkins forever, the gang reunites on a mission to save Eleven from the upside down. With the introduction of Will's new abilities and relationships forming and devolving, nothing is as it seems.

1. Chapter 1

She ran through the still air, filled with white specks of ash.

Rotten sticks broke under her shoes as she worked her legs up and down. There were many moments before when Eleven had been afraid. Most of them involved experiments and being dragged places against her will – even by people she called her friends. But this was different. This time, she felt the fear trickle through her blood. However, Eleven now found an unfamiliar feeling mingling with the tried and true emotion of fear:

Determination.

Running through the gap in two trees, Eleven made for the tree house ladder. She could see it in the distance, a bright light in the surrounding darkness. Just as everything else did, the shoddily made building looked horrific. But, this was her new home, and she was stuck with it whether she liked it or not. Eleven was growing used to the sick smell of rotting flesh and the dead animal carcasses that frequented the ground. Even the decaying spider webs were beginning to look homey. However, there were many things that made her wish she was out of the Upside Down. Many, many things. She still got her eggos occasionally, left by a mysterious person on the other side. But there was no way to replicate friendship. Friends were people who never lied to you and kept promises, no matter what.

Here, she had no one.

Her breath grew ragged and her body felt like it was going to give out, but she wasn't at the tree house yet. Trees could be heard falling just within her ear shot. They made a sad crunch on the ground, like something not dying so much as already dead. A figure flashed in her mind and she let out a strangled shriek. She covered her mouth and kept running.

Finally, she reached her target: the tree trunk holding her home. Her hands grasped the ladder as she kicked up from the ground. Her legs pumped as one rung after another passed her gaze, hands grabbing

onto sticky material. She looked back and saw a figure jumping through the gnarled tree branches. One second it was there; another second it wasn't. She couldn't think about it – she could only think about climbing.

The last rung passed as her hands moved from the sticky substance that was on the ladder rungs to the equally as sticky substance on the base of the building. Eleven pulled herself up, grabbed the knotted door knob and quickly opened and closed the door. She was inside. Finally. All she could do was wait. Breathing in and out calmly, Eleven concentrated with her eye on the door. I

felt as though time had stopped around her. Everything went quiet. All she could hear was her breath, coming in and out. She could hear that and the faint echo of a voice that once told her everything was going to be okay.

And then the door flew open.

2. Chapter 2

"Last one there's a Siren!"

Mike laughed, looking over his shoulder and zooming down the hill. His skinny, pale legs pumped up and down as he tried to maintain steadiness. He was going so fast he felt like he was going to fall off the bike, but Mike had gone faster.

Names were stupid, but for young boys, there was nothing more important than pride. Well, except for bragging rights.

The other boys pedaled behind him, weighed down by their backpacks. School was finally back in session. Summer had been fun – many hours devoted to lengthy and even more elaborate campaigns – but there were only so many stories Mike could come up with. And none of them compared to the story they had lived out in their very own lives. Life had become boring after that.

Mike looked over his shoulder and saw that Will was right behind him. Will began to lose his breath and fell behind Dustin and Lucas who were weaving in and out of each other. Mike's eyebrows knit together, but he was too focused on winning to fall behind. Mike arrived at the house, hopped off his bike, and raised his arms in triumph. Lucas arrived second, followed by Dustin, and eventually, Will. Will had been looking out of breath lately, always arriving last whenever they raced from one street to another. The other boys slid off their bikes as they arrived.

"I win again! All bow before me and my powers of destruction!" He pretended to slay them all with flames coming from his hands as they fell to their knees. They let out pretend shrieks, "You're too powerful," "we're not worthy," "it burns." Will was the only one who didn't join in, letting out a small smile. He hopped off his bike and headed towards the door.

"You want something to eat? Mom made brownies yesterday." Mike called over to him. "No, I'm not hungry. I'm just going to head downstairs," Will responded with a shrug and headed on in. Mike stared after him, eyes searching for a reason he couldn't think of.

Finally, Lucas broke the silence.

"Am I the only one who sees he's been acting weird recently?" Mike looked back toward him and nodded his head. "Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's just weird being back at school for him." Mike led his bike to the wall and stood it up straight.

Dustin interjected, through his dysplasia affected gums, "The whole school *did* think he was kidnapped."

Lucas added, "And then dead."

Dustin finished, "And then back from the dead."

Lucas, "You have to admit, it'd be weird for anyone."

Mike shrugged and headed for the door. The boys followed. "Sure, but we also fought off a Demogorgon, and it's not weird for us."

Dustin and Lucas exchanged looks as Mike opened the door and headed in. Dustin added, "It's not?"

Back downstairs, Dustin and Lucas munched on a plate filled with brownies. Mike stared down at a board game that was unopened on the square table. "Mom bought me this, but it looks dumb. Something Nancy would play, if she was cool and actually played board games." Will was standing by the window, looked back at Mike and smiled. He walked back over and sat down.

"What's it called?" He asked, reaching over for a brownie, despite his earlier comment. "'Life', I think. Looks girly. And boring." Will grabbed it out of Mike's hands and pulled open the top. "It's very... colorful?" He grinned towards Mike who grinned back through crooked teeth. "I didn't come up with another campaign yet. I'm trying to come up with something great involving several monsters and multiple Troll hoards, but I used up all my ideas on the last one."

Lucas bit a brownie and looked over. "Give it a day, I'm sure you'll think of something. Think about... you know." Mike shot him a look and then looked at Will, but Will was too engrossed in the colorful game to hear anything. "I'll come up with something. Just wait for

the weekend. Mom's been complaining about you staying too late on school nights anyway."

"Just tell her it's for the AV Club! Mr. Clarke finally got a new radio after what happened to the last one. Say we're working on ideas for that!" Dustin said as he shoved two whole brownies in his mouth.

"Good idea!"

He was about to say more, but out of the corner of his eye he noticed something strange. It was like the wall wasn't completely there, fading in and out of reality. He took a double take, but when he looked back, it was normal.

"Mike?" Lucas asked, looking from Mike to the wall.

"I just... did you see that?" He wasn't letting something slide. Last year proved that anything could, in certain situations, be something. Nothing was too far-fetched.

"You mean that stain right above the couch? I think Dustin made that last year when your mom made sloppy joes."

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"You got it everywhere and Nancy had to help you out, and you were like 'ooh, Nancy. I love you so much.'" Lucas made pretend smooching noises with his mouth, pretending to kiss the air in front of him. He closed his eyes and puckered his lips while Mike and Will laughed on. Mike laughed so much as Lucas taunted Dustin that he completely forgot about the wall.

It was just a wall, anyway, and he had been paranoid after the past year. It was nothing. And he didn't even remember seeing anything after Mom called the boys upstairs for supper. She had made macaroni and cheese, a rare treat. Mac and Cheese was more important than confusing visions out of the corner of his eye.

It was nothing, and after enough time of not thinking about it, that's all it ended up being. Nothing.

3. Chapter 3

After an evening of Mac and Cheese at Mike's house, it was time for the boys to say their goodbyes. As usual, Mike stood outside of his house and waved as the other three biked out of sight. Unlike a year ago, Dustin and Lucas made sure to go with Will to his home first. He lived in a shadier part of Hawkins, and they weren't taking any more chances.

They biked up to the house and noticed there were two cars in the driveway – one more than the usual since Jonathan was still at work. Will's eyebrows knit together as he took in the 1980's Chevrolet. The first thing he noticed was the dirt on the tires, but that was moments before he noticed the row of police lights dim on the car's roof.

"What do you think Hopper's doing here?" Dustin asked, foot motionless on the pedal. He had spent more time with the police chief than Will had, so it made sense that he recognized the car's owner. "I'm not really sure..." Will replied hesitantly.

"I'm sure he's just checking in on you. Wants to say 'Hi' or something." Dustin said with his usual optimism. Lucas shot him a look. "I don't think Hopper's the kind of person to make house calls." Dustin shrugged and Will just stared blankly ahead. He steeled himself before turning back to the boys. "You guys can head home. I can take it from here."

After moments of going back and forth to try and ascertain whether Will actually wanted that, Dustin and Lucas finally biked off. They shot back jokes that could be heard until their bodies faded into the night's fog. After they disappeared from view, Will hiked up his backpack and walked to the door.

He took a deep breath before entering the house.

Dustin and Lucas biked on. The night was filled with fog that seemed to appear out of nowhere, which made their bike ride feel eerie. After a minute of pedaling at their usual speed, their feet began to quicken. "Do you hear that?" Lucas said quietly. "Hear what?" Dustin asked back. "Nothing. That's what. It's just so...quiet." All of this was said

through Lucas' panting breath, but that was when Dustin realized it.

All of the bugs that chirped in the night had gone silent. The whistling trees were no longer whistling. Even their bikes with wheels turning frantically seemed to be put on mute. The only thing that could be heard was their breathing, and even that was shallower and quieter than normal.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Dustin said, trying not to look at Lucas. "Last time we thought that, there was a monster attacking our friend." Lucas hissed, his eyes flying all over.

Dustin thought about it for a moment. "All right. We're almost at my house. Make your parents let you stay over." Lucas eyed him. "On a school night?" "Do you have any other ideas?" Lucas thought for a moment and shook his head. "No, I guess not."

Dustin nodded his head as they turned the corner onto his street. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash through the trees. He rubbed his eye with his shoulder, almost crashing into Lucas. "Hey! Watch it! What're you doing?" Lucas yelled out. "I thought I saw something over there," Dustin replied. They slowed their bikes down and stared into the woods for a moment.

There was nothing. No movement, no sound: Nothing.

And then the trees began to whistle and the cicadas could be heard from blocks away. They waited for another second before shrugging and sitting back on their bikes. "I think I'm going to go home. I'll be fine." Lucas said as they headed up the street. Dustin looked at the road with worry in his eyes. "Maybe my mom should drive you home. You can put your bike in the back seat."

At first, Lucas looked like he was about to fight the suggestion, but he shrugged yet again and nodded his head. "Fine, but only because the Upside Down sounds nasty!"